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## **The Study Group Learning Strategy in Open and Distance Learning: Students' Perspectives**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study aimed at analysing the students' views on the effectiveness of the study group strategy in ODL. The qualitative study adopted a case study research design and collected through the use of interview and document analysis, which assisted in support to support, sustain or disprove the responses by participants during the interviews. All the 356 registered students during the January to June 2014 semester, in the four faculties of the Zimbabwe Open University's Mashonaland East Region formed the population out of which 25 made it into the sample chosen through convenience sampling. The results show that most of the students were not willing to study alone or work in small groups but preferred to work in large groups but on average most students preferred to work in groups of four. Domineering by some members of the group inhibited group participation. Most students would rather remain in groups because of a number of benefits they derived from group association among which are the generation of more ideas and information and sources of the same for use by the learners. Group study method contributed to the improvement in the examination grades and the quality of assignment as there is sharing of resources. In an ODL institution the geographical location of the learners made it difficult to study in groups as students stay in different geographical locations thus inhibiting any meaningful grouping by the learners. The study recommended that there is need to continue to instill in the ODL student the need to work in groups despite the weaknesses that go with the study method. Where programmes do not have adequate numbers to constitute a meaningful group, affected students should be referred to the nearest regional centres where they can formulate groups. Weekends and vacations are the most appropriate times for the study group meetings and as such they need to be fully utilised. The use of social networking such as whatsapp and other internet based platforms for group discussions; email discussion groups needs to be considered seriously by group members to lessen movement and conveniently learners would carry out discussions in the comfort of their homes and at the same time reduce travel expenses.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) has many challenges in terms of the teaching and learning processes. Given that in some instances the ODL student has very limited face to face interaction with the tutor it becomes very necessary to identify strategies that are more effective in enhancing the students' learning processes. The common teaching-learning strategies in ODL include the module, limited face to face interaction, use of the library, on-line learning and the study group. While these strategies have been hailed by some as being effective, others have argued that some of these are less effective and hence favourable as delivery modes in ODL given that the student and the tutor are separated very often geographically. At the Zimbabwe Open University, the module plays a vital role in the assisting the student get the needed course content. However, in some instances, the level at which the content is pitched is very beyond the students' ability, hence the need for tutorials. Tutorials at the same institution were previously pegged at ten hours per semester per course. However, with the passage of time, the time allocated for each course was reduced to six. This meant that learners would come into contact with tutors for a few hours before they could sit for their examinations. In this regard, there was need therefore, to find more extra hours for students to meet through their own initiative. It is against this background that most students saw it wise to cause the formation of study groups in order to make up for the reduced official contact time. In view of the geographical dispersion of the ODL students, among other issues, this study aimed at analysing the students' views on the effectiveness of the study group strategy in ODL.

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## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Theoretical Underpinnings of the Study**

The present study is based on the social facilitation paradigm that examines the co-action effects on human motivation. A number of studies on social facilitation effects have been carried out and while results have proved positive (Harlow, 1932; James, 1953, 1960; Cannon, 1955), some studies have proved the findings void (Allee and Masure, 1936; Klopfer, 1958, Gates and Allee, 1933). Social facilitation effects are assumed to be influences of individuals on each other’s behaviour. Thus the paradigm assumes that behaviour is a consequence derived from the sheer presence of others (Zajonc, 1965). Where individuals are observed simultaneously engaged in the same activity in full view of the other (co-action), there is marked improvement, or otherwise, in task performance.

Experiments on co-action effects were carried out on albino rats by Harlow (1932) and he observed that more food was consumed by the animals when they were in pairs than when they were fed alone. Similar findings were established by James (1960) and James and Cannon (1955) when they found out that puppies fed more when in groups than when alone. According to Chen (1937), an ant’s amount of work increases markedly in the presence of another ant companion.

To the contrary, however, some studies have shown that performance is inhibited in the presence of others. In his experiment, Klopfer (1958) established that birds (greenfinches) learnt to discriminate between palatable and unpalatable food sources more efficiently when working alone. Allee and Masure (1936) established the same results in that speed of learning by his birds was greater for the isolated birds than for the paired ones. Gates and Allee (1933) established that group situations inhibited learning when they studied cockroaches learning a maze in isolation and in groups. It took less time for the isolated than the grouped ones to learn the maze. On the other hand, experiments on humans proved that performance was better in groups than in alone conditions (Allport, 1920; Dashiell, 1930) but contradictory findings were established by Travis (1928) who found out that the presence of others decreased performance.

### **Some of the Perceived Benefits of Studying in Groups**

Studies in higher education have shown that there are more benefits than limitations in learning through groups (Davis, 1993). Wasley (2006) established that students who participate in group learning get better grades as this helps students learn more actively and effectively (Murphy, Mahoney, Chen, Mendoza-Diaz & Yang, 2005). The group learning method also assists learners to possess the ability to work in groups and developed suitable teamwork skills, which skills are much sought after by potential employers after graduation (Blowers, 2000). Burke (2011) has established that groups have more information than a single individual and they have more resources to fall on in terms of information sources and equipment for use in the group discussions. Besides this, Burke (2011) asserts that due to a variety of backgrounds and experiences, group members are at an advantage as they share experiences to the benefit of their learning.

Burke (2011) further argues that groups stimulate creativity and group discussions are prone to be remembered better than individualised learning. Group learning fosters learning and comprehension. Some studies have also shown that students working in small groups have a tendency to learn more of what is taught and retain it longer than when the same material is presented in other instructional formats (Barkley, Cross & Major, 2005; Burke, 2011; Davis, 1993). According to Burke (2011), students who are engaged in group problem solving are more committed to the solution and are better satisfied with their participation in the group than those who were not involved. Students gain a better understanding of themselves while working in groups (Burke, 2011). Group work allows people to gain a more accurate picture of how others see them. Well developed interpersonal skills were listed by employers among the top 10 skills sought after in university graduates (Graduate Outlook Survey, 2010). Overall, effective student participation in group work is an important learning outcome for higher education courses (Elgort, Smith & Toland, 2008). Although many students feel as though they can accomplish assignments better by themselves rather than in a group, instructors find that group work helps the students apply knowledge better (Elgort, Smith & Toland, 2008; Burke, 2011).

### **Some Limitations of Studying in Groups**

Beebe and Masterson (2003) state that there may be pressure from the group to conform to the majority opinion. They also contend that most people do not like conflict and attempt to avoid it when

possible. Group think by the majority opinion might lead to individuals agreeing to bad solutions just in order to avoid conflict. Some members may rely too heavily on others to do the work and come examination time, they may fail (Beebe and Masterson, 2003). Other studies have established that some group members do not pitch in and help and do not adequately contribute to the group discussions and tasks (Burke, 2011; Freeman & Greenacre, 2011). It also takes more time to work in a group than to work alone and it also takes longer to accomplish tasks when working with others because of a diversity of views shared by the group (Burke, 2011).

### **Making Group Study Method of Learning More Effective**

Burke (2011) has remarked that merely coming together as a group does not itself create critical thinking outcomes, hence, there is need to take into account certain considerations. The tutor and the learners must be cognisant of how best to facilitate effective group learning environments. Accordingly, therefore, Johnson, Johnson and Smith (1991) suggest that group tasks should be integral to the course objectives. Group work should complement the learning objectives outlined in the course outline. For example, Burke (2011) states that if one of the learning objectives is to promote critical thinking skills or writing enhancement, then the group work should support these areas.

Assigning the members of the group is integral to the success of the group. Some faculty members prefer to randomly assign students to groups. This has the advantage of maximising heterogeneity of the group (Davis, 1993) and is an effective way of assigning group members in large classrooms. If the class size is small and the instructor is familiar with most of the students, the instructor can select the group members based on known attributes of the class. For example, the instructor can form the groups while taking to account performance levels, academic strengths and weaknesses, ethnicity, and gender (Connery, 1988).

Some studies have advocated for the class to self-select their group; however, this has some disadvantages (Burke, 2011). Self selected groups often gravitate toward friends and roommates (Csernica et al., 2002). This can result in the students self segregating and spending more time socialising than working on the group project (Cooper, 1990; Burke, 2011). Research suggests that groups which are assigned by the tutor tend to perform better than self selected groups (Felder & Brent, 2001).

Freeman and Greenacre (2011) suggest that group interventions should be aimed at the destructive group member, focus on the behaviour and not the person, and address the benefits of the group process for the group as a whole. Barkley et al. (2005) recommend designing the coursework in such a way that the success of the individual relies on the success of the group. The tutor should assist the group in creating ways in which to handle unproductive members and foster communication skills.

Elgort, Smith and Toland (2008) advocated for the use of wikis in a class and found that most wikis encouraged student participation and group involvement, but did not counteract student preference to work alone rather than in a group. Some tutors would use online discussion forums in their face to face classes to foster group participation and engagement (Wright & Lawson, 2005). This has the advantage of engaging students who are always mobile and students who have jobs in addition to taking classes. Utilising online or web based might help resistant students engage in and benefit from group work (Burke, 2011; Elgort, Smith and Toland, 2008).

Supplementing lectures with group work helps students feel engaged and subsequently learn more as some tutors come to the rescue of stranded learners (Payne, Monl-Turner, Smith & Sumter, 2004; Burke, 2011).

### **PROBLEM STATEMENT**

It is imperative for the ODL student to come up with survival learning strategies given that the student is at the heart of the learning as at most 90% effort should come from the student with tutor and, most probably, peers contributing to the remaining 10%. Students should, therefore, be creative and devise means of making the most out of the limited time available. One way of overcoming time constraints is the formation of study groups. While these groups have tended to work in conventional institutions, issues will be raised on the extent to which these study groups are effective in ODL given the geographical dispersion of the students as well as other students’ demographics.

## **AIMS AND OBJECTIVES**

While the aim of this study was to establish the students’ perspective of the effectiveness of the study group method in ODL, the following were the objectives which the study aimed at achieving:

- To establish the extent to which ODL students are comfortable in studying as groups.
- To find out the perceived benefits of studying in groups for ODL learners.
- To establish the limitations of studying in groups as perceived by ODL learners.
- To establish how ODL learners can make effective use of the group study method of learning.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The study sought to answer the following research questions which stood as sub problems:

- To what extent are ODL students comfortable in studying as groups?
- What are the perceived benefits of studying in groups for ODL learners?
- What are the limitations of studying in groups as perceived by ODL learners?
- How can ODL learners make effective use of the group study method of learning?

## **RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

The present study is rooted in the qualitative paradigm and as such adopts that case study research design. Data were collected through the use of interview, which enabled the researchers to gain deep insights into the use of the study group learning strategy among ODL learners, and document analysis, which assisted in support to support, sustain or disprove the responses by participants during the interviews. The two instruments thus enabled triangulation in order to enhance the trustworthiness and credibility of results.

## **POPULATION AND SAMPLE**

All the 356 registered students during the January to June 2014 semester, in the four faculties of the Zimbabwe Open University’s Mashonaland East Region formed the population. Out of the total population, 25 made it into the sample chosen through convenience sampling. The study being qualitative, the participants were deemed adequate to provide enough data needed to answer the research questions at hand.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS**

The study sought to analyse the students’ views on the effectiveness of the study group strategy in ODL. In order to answer the main research question, four sub problems which stood as research questions were asked.

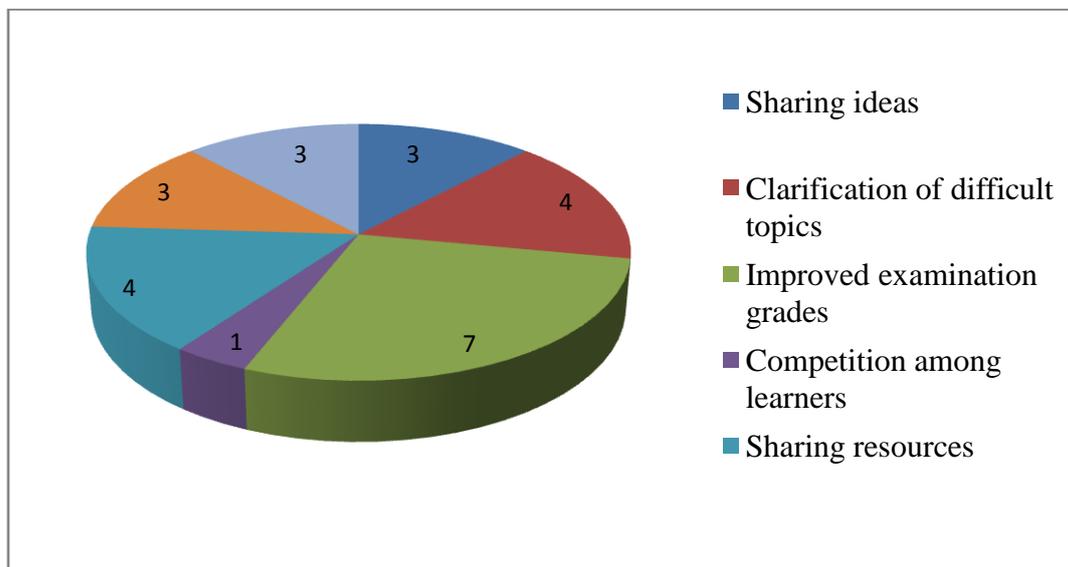
### ***Research Question 1: To what extent are ODL students comfortable in studying as groups?***

In order to answer this question, participants were asked if, given an option, they would be comfortable to study in groups. Results indicate that most of the student participants were not willing to study alone or work in small groups. The results confirm previous studies on social facilitation effects have been proved that individuals were very interested to work in the company of others (Harlow, 1932; James, 1953, 1960; Cannon, 1955; Chen, 1937). In sharp contrast, findings elsewhere suggest that many students feel they can accomplish assignments better by themselves rather than in a group (Elgort, Smith & Toland, 2008; Burke, 2011). Gates and Allee (1933) established that group situations inhibited learning but respondents in this current study indicated that they preferred to work in large groups but on average most students preferred to work in groups of four. This also helps to confirm that behaviour is a consequence derived from the sheer presence of others (Zajonic, 1965). Asked if there was any limit to the number of fellow students they may want to study with, most participants indicated that they preferred to work with co-students of up to five and not more. This was because they felt that the larger the number, the more the confusion as the learners sat down to discuss issues. The participants were also asked what would inhibit them from continuing studying in a group. Issues raised by the learners were that when some started domineering, they would leave the group. In some instances, discussions dragged for longer periods than necessary resulting in some group members withdrawing.

However, most students indicated that they would continue to be enticed to study as a group. A number of reasons were provided most of which are benefits they derived from group association. Among these are the view that there is power in numbers and this translates to more ideas and information and sources of the same for use by the learners. When asked whether given the option, they would prefer to work alone, the majority of the participants were in favour of working in groups. Only a few indicated preference to work alone, thus contradicting previous studies (Elgort, Smith & Toland, 2008; Burke, 2011). Asked to give reasons on this, the majority stated that group work was a waste of time as at most learners discussed social issues, thereby wasting study time.

**Research Question 2: What are the perceived benefits of studying in groups for ODL learners?**

The participants were asked what benefits they derived from their learning in study groups. Figure 1 below shows the responses.



According to Figure 1, sharing of ideas was brought forward by 3 students who went on to indicate that a lot of ideas were being shared by learners when they learnt in groups thus being in agreement with some studies which have established that time spent studying in groups usually results in better solutions (Burke, 2011). Four students indicated that group study was beneficial in that it assisted in the clarification of difficult topics. The results concur with those by other previous researchers who have asserted that effective student participation in group work is an important learning outcome for higher education courses (Elgort, Smith & Toland, 2008). And to that effect they have remarked that supplementing lectures with group work helps students feel engaged and subsequently learn more (Payne, Monl-Turner, Smith & Sumter, 2004; Burke, 2011).

Since groups were predominantly heterogeneous, the more able students were forthcoming in the difficult courses especially computer courses and statistics. Some 7 participants indicated that there was an improvement in the examination grades as a result of participating in group study thus confirming results from previous studies which have established that students who participate in group learning get better grades as this helps students learn more actively and effectively (Murphy, Mahoney, Chen, Mendoza-Diaz & Yang, 2005). Most had just received their semester examinations and there was marked improvement in the grades. One student remarked that in previous semesters, her results were poor but after engaging in group study, there appears to be a remarkable improvement and hence the participant would continue to study in the group. Competition among learners accounted for only 1 participant while sharing of resources had 4. Some 3 students indicated that there was improvement in the quality of assignments but in some instances, some studies have found out that many students feel as they can accomplish assignments better by themselves rather than in a group (Elgort, Smith & Toland, 2008; Burke, 2011). Another 3 indicating that the study group method was beneficial in that it helped in inculcating leadership skill among the learners.

**Research Question 3: What are the limitations of studying in groups as perceived by ODL learners?**

Being in an ODL institution, most participants felt that the geographical location made it difficult to study in groups. Most participants stayed in different geographical locations thus inhibiting any

meaningful grouping by the learners. On average, the distance apart the location of the students was twenty kilometres. This is a long distance and thus would prohibit meetings by the students. This is why some studies have revealed that some group members do not pitch up and contribute to the group (Burke, 2011; Freeman & Greenacre, 2011).

A number of social factors made it difficult for the students to study in groups. Meeting with students of various sexes would be a challenge if the some of the students were in marriages. Arranging for group meetings would entail that all learners are available and have the freedom to attend. One participant remarked that given that she was married, she had no autonomy to move in and out of the house for group study as this could be negatively interpreted by the spouse.

From the responses provided by the participants, it would appear there a number of economic factors that inhibit group study as ODL students. Firstly, there were issues to do with travel and subsistence bearing in mind that the students were in separate locations. They had to meet expenses in terms of bus fare, fuel (if they used their own vehicles) and at times, accommodation as they had to sleep over at some location for the duration of the group discussions.

Issues pertaining to group think were also prevalent in the responses. A few individuals monopolised the discussions to the extent that what they provided ended up being adopted as the most appropriate and correct contributions despite them being otherwise. As established in some studies, this could be due to pressure from the group to conform to the majority opinion (Beebe and Masterson, 2003). Asked what then the effects of such a scenario were, one participant remarked that some members opted to walk out of the group, resulting in a potential disintegration of the group. However, in some cases, some group members remained quiet as a way of conflict avoidance despite knowing full well that some of the contributed materials were incorrect or inaccurate. Studies elsewhere have contended that most people do not like conflict and attempt to avoid it when possible and that group think might lead to individuals agreeing to bad solutions just in order to avoid conflict (Beebe and Masterson, 2003).

A closer look at the group compositions indicated that most of the groups were heterogeneous in terms of gender, at times, profession, age and position at work. According to some participants, position at work mattered because one could not be seen to be arguing against their bosses. However, did not matter as the elderly always sought guidance from the young group members especially on issues pertaining to the more technical courses such as computers and statistics.

In the words of one of the respondents, group work study was tiresome as they took a lot of time to come to an agreement or reach a compromise. Burke (2011) established the same when he found out that it took more time to work in a group than to work alone, at the same time taking too longer to accomplish tasks when working with others.

**Research Question 4: How can ODL learners make effective use of the group study method of learning?**

Participants were asked to suggest ways of improving the group learning method and table 1 below shows the suggestions.

**Table1.** Strategies for improving the group learning method

Strategy for improvement	Number	Percentage
Timing of meetings	12	48
Use of social networking such as whatsapp and other internet based platforms for group discussions, email discussion groups	16	64
Rotating leadership for different courses	7	28
Assigning courses to different group members	12	48
Inviting tutors at meeting venues	20	80
Supervision of groups by local part time tutors	13	52

Table 1 shows that 12(48%) participants indicated that there was need to attend to the timing of meetings. One participant indicated that being ODL students, most participants were in full time employment and other social obligations to attend to hence there was need to look into the issue of timing. Besides the geographical location of the students made studying together problematic as students were very far apart. Thus, weekends and vacations were the most appropriate times for the

study group meetings, according to the learners. Some 16(64%) suggested the use of social networking such as whatsapp and other internet based platforms for group discussions, email discussion groups. Almost similar suggestions were provided by Elgort, Smith and Toland (2008) and Burke (2011) who advocated for the utilisation of wikis and other computer based platforms. However, the cost effect may prohibit the ODL learner to acquire gadgets for use in the type of communication. One of the participants indicated that this would lessen movement and conveniently learners would carry out discussions in the comfort of their homes. This would also limit movement and at the same time reduce travel expenses. Studies elsewhere have also established that the use online discussion forums foster participation and engagement (Wright & Lawson, 2005) and can also be used to engage commuter students and students under employment who are studying through ODL. Others have also established that utilising online or web based might help resistant students engage in and benefit from group work (Burke, 2011; Elgort, Smith and Toland, 2008).

Only 7(28%) participants advocated for the rotation of leadership for different courses. Those who were more knowledgeable in given courses were to be accorded the chance to lead group discussions in such courses. Some 12(48%) participants advocated for assigning courses to different group members. This was to accord all the members a chance to present and lead group discussions in the areas they are familiar with and contented in handling. In turn, this would be more beneficial to the group. A majority of 20(80%) indicated that it could be better to invite tutors at meeting venues. However, this could also come with an extra cost because the tutors were not entitled to claim from the institution as this would be a private arrangement between the learners and their tutors. The same could go for the 13(52%) who advocated for the supervision of groups by local part time tutors. In the participants’ views, the presence of part time tutors would be very significant as these are knowledgeable and would help guide the group studies

## **CONCLUSIONS**

From the results, it can be concluded that most of the students are not willing to study alone or work in small groups but preferred to work in large groups but on average most students preferred to work in groups of four. Domineering by some members of the group inhibits group participation. Most students would rather remain in groups because of a number of benefits they derive from group association among which are the generation of more ideas and information and sources of the same for use by the learners. Group work benefits students through sharing of ideas, assisting in the clarification of difficult topics and courses for example computer courses and statistics. Group study method contributes to improvement in the examination grades and the quality of assignment as there is sharing of resources. The study group method is also beneficial in that it helps in inculcating leadership skill among the learners. In an ODL institution the geographical location of the learners makes it difficult to study in groups as students stay in different geographical locations thus inhibiting any meaningful grouping by the learners. ODL students have to meet expenses in terms of bus fare, fuel and at times, accommodation as they have to sleep over at some location for the duration of the group discussions. Social factors gender and marital status of the inhibit group work strategy. Group think, and where a few individuals monopolise the discussions to the extent inappropriate and incorrect contributions are made, dissuade students from joining study groups in ODL. Issues such as gender, profession, age and position at work, matter in group participation.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the above conclusion, it is recommended that:

- There is need to continue to instill in the ODL student the need to work in groups despite the weaknesses that go with the study method.
- Where programmes do not have adequate numbers to constitute a meaningful group, affected students should be referred to the nearest regional centres where they can formulate groups.
- Timing of group study meetings needs to be appropriate so as to accommodate all students.
- Weekends and vacations are the most appropriate times for the study group meetings and as such they need to be fully utilised.
- The use of social networking such as whatsapp and other internet based platforms for group discussions; email discussion groups needs to be considered seriously by group members to lessen

movement and conveniently learners would carry out discussions in the comfort of their homes and at the same time reduce travel expenses.

- Groups need to rotate leadership for different courses during which process those who are more knowledgeable in given courses are accorded the chance to lead group discussions in such courses.
- There is also need to assign courses to different group members to accord all the members a chance to present and lead group discussions in the areas they are familiar and contented with in handling.
- Groups need to invite tutors at meeting venues for the supervision of groups and to help guide the group studies.

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**Richard Bukaliya & Augustine K. Mubika “The Study Group Learning Strategy in Open and Distance Learning: Students’ Perspectives”**

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